

Climate change causing Britain to shrink with some coastal communities condemned to be swallowed by the sea

Scientists welcome "honest conversation" about the long standing threat of sea level rise driven by climate change, warning coastal protection measures cannot save all communities, even if the Environment Agency could afford them everywhere.

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🕒 Tuesday 7 June 2022 11:57, UK

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Some British coastal communities will "inevitably" be forced from their homes as climate change eats away at their shores, the head of England's Environment Agency (EA) has warned.

Sir James Bevan, the EA's chief executive, said that climate change means "some of our communities cannot stay where they are".

He told the Flood and Coast Conference in Telford on Tuesday: "While we can come back safely and build back better after most river flooding, there is no coming back for land that coastal erosion has taken away or which a rising sea level has put permanently or frequently under water."

Sir James said that this means the "right answer... will have to be to move communities away from danger rather than try to protect them from the inevitable impacts of a rising sea level".

Although he said it is "far too early to say which communities are likely to move in due course", the Welsh village Fairbourne has already been told it will have to relocate as Gwynedd Council cannot maintain flood defences indefinitely.

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Meanwhile the low-lying Fens in eastern England, which account for 7% of England's agricultural production, already lies partly below sea level due to drainage.

Sir James reassured that "no one should be forced from their homes against their will", but that "we need to start the conversation about all this now".

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Jim Hall, professor of climate and environmental risks at Oxford University, welcomed the acknowledgment of Sir James's "hardest of all inconvenient truths".

"Even if the Environment Agency could afford to build coast protection everywhere - which they cannot - the things that many people cherish about the coast, like beaches and sand dunes, will eventually become submerged, unless we start to plan now for how the coastline can adjust to rising sea levels," he said.

He called for "honest conversations" within coastal communities about the future, and a strategic approach to managing the coast sustainably.

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One million Britons to be exposed to coastal flooding by 2100

According to the EA's new Flood and Coastal Erosion Risk Management Strategy Roadmap to 2026, one in six people in England are at risk of rain or sea flooding.

And in the UK, one million people are expected to be exposed to annual coastal flooding by the end of this century.

Sir James recalled the flooding in London last summer, which saw public transport closed, hospitals evacuated and people forced from their homes.

"The severity of these flood events appears to be getting worse, which is exactly what the science predicts," he warned.

Other climate scientists welcomed Sir James's comments, warning that sea levels will continue creeping up - in some areas beyond our ability to adapt.

Professor Robert Nicholls, director of the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research, called it a "timely official recognition of a major problem that has been predictable for some time but easy to ignore as it only slowly becomes apparent".

Ilan Kelman, professor of disasters and health at University College London, said leaving a community is "devastating" but "nothing new for England and Wales".

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A recent report from the IPCC - the United Nations' international group of climate scientists - projected that coastal flood damage in Europe will increase at least ten times by the end of this century, and even more so if we do not change the way people live in those areas.

In response, the EA is aiming to improve assessments and mapping of flood risk, as well as information on investment decisions.

It is also channelling £150m into 25 new innovative projects to tackle the threat of flood and coastal change

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